

Bedbugs face the heat at Chorey Park



By Jimmy LaRoue

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Carlton Williams of the Suffolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority takes a temperature reading while heat-treating an apartment at Chorey Park Thursday. Temperatures can reach nearly 190 degrees in the rooms during treatment.

On the fourth floor of the Chorey Park Apartments, Carlton Williams sets up the propane tanks and plugs them into the direct-fired heaters inside two apartments — one filled with possessions, and the other empty save a refrigerator and stove.

It's the beginning of a more than six-hour process to rid both units of bedbugs,

which have been a source of consternation for the Suffolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority since it learned the building had a bedbug issue about a year ago.

Though the problem was smaller then, a January inspection found that 35 of the building's 100 apartments showed signs of bedbugs. After a chemical treatment of all 100 apartments by Suffolk Pest Control, the building had just one unit with a bedbug problem in March, according to the authority's Housing Operations Director Mitchell Layne.

She said the number fluctuated through June, when there were six apartments with bedbugs. Following a door-to-door survey of all residents in July, 16 residents suspected they had bedbugs, but upon inspection, Layne said there were just five with bedbugs.

Two of those apartments were heat treated late last month following training on the authority's newly acquired heat machines.

It's these measures that has the authority believing that it is getting a handle on the problem, but Chorey Park Property Manager Mary Beth Dooley said it's a long-term effort.

"People expect a quick fix, and it's not always a quick fix," Dooley said. "It all depends on the severity of the problem of that particular apartment."

Bedbugs face the heat at Chorey Park- Page 2



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And that's why Williams was on the fourth floor for much of the day Thursday. Because after setting up the heat treatment and turning on the machines, it's his job to monitor the temperatures inside the two apartments.

About 10 minutes after turning on the heater in the possession-filled apartment, it heated up to about 120 degrees, and within an hour, temperatures inside the unit reached more than 150 degrees.

The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences says that the heat should reach at least 135 degrees, which will not damage belongings, but will penetrate cracks and crevices where bedbugs live, causing them to reach their thermal death point of around 115 degrees. It usually takes about 90 minutes to kill them at that temperature, but when the temperature gets a few degrees hotter, VDACS said the bedbugs die instantly.

"I go a little hotter than that," Williams said. "I want to make sure they're gone — 180, 190 degrees."

Williams, whose bald head was beading with sweat as he moved in and out of the two apartments during their treatment, said he was taking no chances. He not only wanted to make sure the temperatures were getting hot enough to kill the bedbugs, he also wanted to make sure he staying in the rooms just long enough to find out how hot the apartments were getting. "After it gets so hot, you can't stay in there," Williams said. "I can't stay in there. I go in there as long as my body can stand it."

That's about 90 seconds of temperatures ranging from 135 to 170 degrees during the morning portion of the treatment before retreating to the 71-degree hallway.

He'll keep the apartment doors mostly closed to trap the heat inside, cracking them enough for the lines to go from the propane tank in the hallway to the direct-fired heaters inside the room.

"I'm holding up pretty good," Williams said after one temperature check.

He'll run the heat treatment for about two-and-a-half hours at a time, checking the temperature in each apartment every 30 to 45 minutes before resting the equipment for about 45 minutes to an hour before resuming the heat treatment for another two-and-a-half hours before cooling the rooms down.

Before treating occupied apartments, anything flammable or any plastics that could melt has to be removed from the apartment — even window blinds. Williams said the goal is to leave any bedbugs without a place to hide.

Bedbugs face the heat at Chorey Park- Page 3



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“They can’t escape,” Williams said of the bedbugs. “Baseboards have got to go. We scrape them so (the bedbugs) can’t run. Roaches even come out here and lay down and die. They run out of there and just drop.”

Dooley said an inspection of all of its apartments was completed Thursday, and while there were a few surprises, most apartments had issues she was aware of already. She said there will be a complete treatment plan for each apartment that has any bedbugs.

“It’s going to be very individualized,” Dooley said. “You can go into one apartment that’s very minimal with stuff and they’re very neat, because as you know, bedbugs have nothing to do with cleanliness. So they can be very neat, very clean, no clutter and they’re easy to treat with the heat because they have nowhere to go hide.

“But then you go into an apartment that, even though they decluttered, and do the very best they can, we’ve still got to go back with the chemical (treatment). So it’s all going to depend upon when it was reported to us and what the severity is, and so forth.”

Dooley said she has drafted a letter to go out soon to all residents, asking them to help identify and report any issues. All residents, she said, should be able to live in comfort — without bedbugs.

“It was a comfort ... to find out in the last couple of days that we’ve done the treatment, all of the things fell into place where the resident was prepared, and we came in and treated, and we did all of those things, we didn’t find any live ones, and we didn’t find any eggs,” Dooley said. “So the chemicals from Suffolk Pest Control worked. It did its job. Now, some of them are probably going to need heat and chemical (treatment), and that’s what we’re assessing now.”

Following a report from Layne last month that outlined the scope of the bedbug problem at Chorey Park, the authority’s board of commissioners voted to solicit bids on having the entire building heat and chemical treated for bedbugs.

“What we’re trying to do is get the word out,” Dooley said. “Don’t be afraid, don’t be ashamed. This is what we’re here for. I can help you, but I can’t do anything if you don’t tell me.”